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AUTHOR Engel, David E.
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ABSTRACT

Why dropouts left school, what they thought about school and teachers, what their lives have been after dropping out, and what made them return to an alternative program for school completion were questions examined in a study in progress in Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania). To date, 88 early school leavers in the Job Corps have been interviewed. Students had many opinions about teachers, but administrators and counselors seemed to have had little impact on their school lives. For many students, school and academics were boring, and teachers were seen mainly as authority figures dispensing subject matter. Students did not seem to be engaged in the learning process. Students seemed to have experienced a lack of caring overall and did not have clear support systems, significant others, or mentors to support school attendance. Those who returned did so largely because of economic pressure in the hope of securing better employment with high school completion. Implications for intervention to prevent dropouts are discussed. Overall, there is an essential need for caring by all school professionals. (SLD)

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Presentation:

Life After Dropping Out

David E. Engel
University of Pittsburgh

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D. E. Engel
U. Pitt

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Introduction and Overview

This research was begun with colleagues in 1986. I had been concerned as a member of the Pittsburgh Board of Public Education [1979-1985] and its President [1982-1983] with school drop-outs. During my tenure the drop-out rate had decreased from the low 30 percentile to the mid-20s. Why? What had been accomplished? I consulted with the Director of Research and Evaluation in the district and he had a quantitative response--statistics. I talked with the Superintendent and he had a few intuitive hunches that policies instituted to "attract and hold" students had been somewhat successful.

Such responses, however, did not exhaust the qualitative questions ["why?"] I was raising. In order to get at such issues we consulted with the Director of Research and Evaluation and developed an interview instrument to be used with actual school drop-outs. Incidentally, we initially referred to them under the more generic umbrella of "Early School Leavers." After all, were they "drop-outs" with one fixed time of leaving school? Where they "fadeouts" who left gradually over time, now and then absent? Were they "push-outs" who had left under some pressure [e.g. administrative suspension, peer harassment].

For a pilot of our interview protocol we received, after appropriate clearance from school district and university, a list of 48 drop-outs from one high school and quickly found none were accessible, no longer at their last known address. We could have given up; but one of the colleagues proposed that we approach the

Pittsburgh Job Corps for they had a GED program for early school leavers. There school leavers experiencing life after dropping out could be found.

Of course, that move changed our perspective and enlarged it somewhat. For now we could seek to understand both why they had left school before completion and why they had returned to an alternative program for completion. Since then we have interviewed some 88 school leavers and expect to have 100 or more upon completion of this study.

The findings I can report at this juncture are several. Our interview protocol sought responses on a number of dimensions: assessment/perceptions of teachers, administrators, counselors, social workers and ancillary personnel [e.g. security guards, secretaries]; school physical environment, including, building cleanliness, safety, noise; neighborhood environment; home environment; recreational outlets, including reading, television, cinema and "hanging out." In addition, we have analyzed interview data and asked, significantly, what was missing in the lives of these school leavers.

In the course of the interviews we have confirmed a number of problems predicted in relevant research literature, such as pregnancy, absenteeism, disciplinary problems, poor achievement. It was only the rare exception where one or more of such problems were absent. Of course, that tells one nothing new. Still careful attention to those matters by teachers and school administrators can serve as early warning signals and, predictable as they may be, need to be accounted for in any early intervention strategies.

Initial Findings

While the problems predicted did occur in significant numbers, they were imbedded in a larger picture which provides greater detail of the dynamics of leaving school before completion. We found that, when asked, the students we interviewed gave us frank assessments of school personnel. In general, we were able to elicit a range of perceptions about teachers. School administrators, notably principals and vice-principals appeared to play little or no positive role in their lives. Similarly, school counselors were "shadow" figures either unnoteworthy or largely unknown.

In more instances than not counselors could not be identified either by name or in terms of what they did. When a student did recall a counselor, all that was remembered was the making out of class schedules. Could this be attributed to an excessive counseling load? Very possibly, for in the school district in question an average counseling load is 300-500 students. Significantly the school leavers interviewed did not perceive a counsellor as one to go to with a personal or academic problem.

Principals were seen "walking hallways," "Keeping order," but somehow apart from students' lives. Vice-principals were better known, primarily for meting out penalties for disciplinary infractions. That was not surprising to us because that is a major role they play in the school district in question.

Teachers, on the other hand, were known and could be named and described. Perceptions were both positive and negative, although we must report

in all candor more negatives than positive. A sampling of positives, from interview transcripts include the following student perceptions:

"helped"
"work with students"
"explained"
"made things clear"
"allowed conversation"
"like a big brother"

Unfortunately the preponderance of comments were negative:

"not help"
"not explain"
"had favorites"
"mean"
"picked on me"
"no patience"
"talk, talk, talk"

Overall teachers represented the best and worst of schooling. They were central in shaping our narrators' choice of their most and lest favorite subjects. In other words, students identified subject matter preference based primarily on their perception of teachers. Students evaluated teachers according to surprisingly simple criteria. Race and gender appeared to mean less than pedagogy and caring. What seems to be a common thread among these responses is a perception of distance between teachers and students.

Why They Left

For many of those interviewed the school and the associated academics were boring. Very little struck them as interesting or important. In large measure the academic climate of the secondary school stands out. Quite in line with major

studies of American schools [e.g. Boyer, 1983; Goodlad, 1983] these school leavers related classroom activities which were dominated by lecturing, so-called seat work and tests. In more instances than not teachers were portrayed as dispensers of subject matter material. Teachers were seen as classroom authorities who told students what was to be learned. Their attitudes were mostly perceived as uncaring. Students, in turn, were to repeat what they were told or what they read in classroom recitation or in passive seat work assignments and, finally, graded for the unit in question on a test.

What was absent was a sense of the students' participation and involvement in the learning process. In contrast, the minority of "good" teachers in one way or another engaged students. They were open to questions. They worked with individuals who did not initially understand what was stated in class lecture or text. From that it may be inferred that a majority of teachers simply presented material and let it go at that.

So the students sat in class unengaged and did minimal amounts of work in class or at home, if any at all, and gained no sense of its meaning for them. In time this led to cutting classes [fading out] prior to leaving school entirely. In sum, they judged classroom experience as dull or "boring."

In addition to finding their school boring, many of those interviewed saw the school as an antagonistic environment. Various situations were reported. Overall students noted conflicts with other students and with school personnel. As far as conflicts with other students are concerned, those interviewed cited harassment.

Typically it had its origin off school premises which led to fights inside the school building. As a consequence, disciplinary action was taken by school administrators.

Whether these disciplinary incidents were dealt with fairly was equivocal in the perception of the school leavers. Are school disciplinary procedures adequate for identifying and dealing fairly with both victim and perpetrator? How can/does school disciplinary procedure relate to counseling as well as penalty? Are school administrators hostage to central office to report "things under control" in their building?

But we cannot leave our findings there. Is there more to dropping out of school? As we analyzed interview transcripts cataloging predictable problems and incidents of boredom and antagonism, it was not until we asked another question that things began to fall in place. What was missing? Was there something lacking in the experience of those school leavers?

What was eloquent in the interviews was an element of caring or, more to the point, a lack thereof. I have alluded to this earlier in relating to the perception of teachers. But it needs to be underlined here. As one student declared: "Nobody gave a damn." It should be noted that the lack of caring was not attributed to the school environment or school personnel alone. Apparently, "nobcdy gave a damn" outside of school--at home, in the neighborhood as well as in the school. They could identify no clear support system, no "significant others" or mentors as we have come to call them.

This finding is of such significance that we plan to comment on it in greater detail in our final report. I will return to it briefly at the end of this presentation.

Why They Returned

The school leavers interviewed for this study returned to an alternative high school program. During the interim between leaving school and enrolling in the Job Corps many if not most, experienced severe economic realities. In their life beyond school it became apparent that employment without a high school diploma would be marginal at best. Many of them had been employed in part-time positions during their schooling years, either after school or during summer vacations or both. Such employment included minimum wage jobs in fast food franchises and baby-sitting. In each such case, the school leavers recognized that their potential for on-going employment did not lead them beyond the minimum wage level.

Consequently, their hope was that returning to an alternate school program and obtaining the GED and some vocational training would make them more employable. That is, the stimulus to return to the alternative educational program was economic as opposed to intellectual concern or curiosity (see New York Times, Section 4A, p. 21, Aug. 2, 1992). So, at this point in the analysis it can be questioned whether schooling for such school leavers has much intellectual import. They are not apparently concerned with questions of the meaning of life or their role in the larger society. More immediate concerns dominate their lives,

understandably so. As has been noted, they lack the fundamental support systems many of their peers enjoy. Their immediate family environment lacks a sense of life goals. There seems to be no reason to delay gratification, to study and achieve academic success and benefit from it later in terms of economic gain or cultural enrichment.

Having left school, the question of continuing economic support became paramount. Their past job experience had been at marginal levels and their observation of adults in and outside the family had been of unemployment or under-employment. So the students we came to know returned to the alternative educational program of the Job Corps with a newly realized impetus for economic self-support.

In addition, for teenage mothers now faced with the care of a child, the economic factor was further reinforced. Given the limited opportunities in the school system for child care, the child care program at the Job Corps provided a support for their own educational and vocational development unavailable elsewhere.

In sum, the economic factor for the school leaver is a reality. I cannot comment on how those who have not returned to an educational/vocational program such as the Job Corps see their future, if they give it any serious attention. Do they have hope? Can they have hope? Those just may be the kind of questions policy makers overlook at the peril of us all.

Implications for School Intervention

A year ago I had a meeting with the school district's director of research and evaluation to report progress in this research. He wanted to know whether our findings had implications for school intervention and I responded that there was good news and bad news? "The good news," I told him, "is that our findings do point to achievable interventions." "Then what's the bad news,"he wanted to know. I replied:"They all cost money." Today I would add that some of our findings seem to require behavioral change as well. Mitigating the early school leaver problem will not be achieved without monetary and human cost.

Consider just one example. One of the reasons our female narrators left school before completion was child care. When they became pregnant they could have chosen to attend a school district program for teenage mothers before delivery. They inferred that as a "special" program there was stigma associated with it and so they left school when the pregnancy became obvious. After delivery they could have applied for in-school child care, but there were only 250 slots, mostly filled, in a school district of over 40,000 average daily attendance. How can there be enough places for child care? Money! How can the stigma of pregnancy during school years be mitigated? Attitude change, of school personnel, of clients and peers.

Similarly counseling for those who show early warning signs of dropping out would require greater funding and a realignment of focus. Although we have not specifically studied the function of school counselors, the testimony of students

interviewed indicates that counselors do not key in on student academic and social problems and provide means for amelioration. Given their large counseling load this is understandable. To reduce that load requires more counselors. At the same time, it is probable that existing counselor responsibilities need to be re-focused to be more sensitive toward the kind of student problems which lead to leaving school before completion.

While the role of teachers is different from that of counselors, a comparable refocusing of attitude seems warranted. The students interviewed indicate that they were disengaged from classroom activities. Instead of being passive recipients of subject matter, the school leavers experience suggest they need greater involvement in active learning with some connection between what they have come from and where they might be going. Apparently, those identified as "good" teachers had worked to find some point of contact with these students.

Overall we note a need for a heightened attitude of caring among all professional in the schools--administrator, counselors, teachers and ancillary personnel. The notion of caring should not end with those in day-to-day contact with students. It extends to central office personnel and school board members. This need is most succinctly stated in the research reported by Fred M. Newman and associates.

> There is more to life than academic achievement. Academic success must not, therefore, be the sole criterion for school membership. Students' moral worth and dignity must be affirmed through other avenues as well, such as nonacademic contact between staff and students. . . .In short. . .the separate features we identify (purpose, fairness, support, success) must be integrated within a more general climate of caring (Newman, p. 23)

"Students," Newman et al., note, "are cared for as persons who represent multiple aspects of humanity, not simply as units to be processed though the official agenda of the school." (Ibid.)

A final caveat is in order. It could be inferred that because the early school leaver problem persist that the nation's public schools are failing. So the public media reports. It should be underlined that this research has focused on a minority of students. The majority of students, on the other hand, are doing well (see Bracey, Kappan, Oct. 1993). Our comments, therefore, are not to be taken as a wholesale indictment of American public education. They are directed at the so-called drop-out phenomenon. In that area the schools have not done as well as they should. Our message then, is simple and morally basic. Our attention, that is, our priorities now need to be directed toward the least privileged in our schools and society. If we do that, then we will have taken a needed step in the American pursuit of justice for all.